Financial Times
August 13, 2002

How to save the world in Johannesburg
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Published: August 13 2002 20:04 | Last Updated: August 13 2002 20:04

The cynics are already deriding the World Summit on Sustainable Development that opens in Johannesburg at the end of the month. Another expensive gabfest, they complain. But it is important to note that much of this criticism comes from rightwing US politicians who have worked for more than a decade to undermine almost every United Nations initiative.

The subject of the summit is deadly serious. No amount of US hostility should deflect the world from a serious consideration of our environmental future. The right wing seeks to cast doubt on the dangers posed by global climate change, species extinction and ecosystem degradation, presenting such fears as a rehash of old, failed forecasts. Haven't we been warned about the risks of famine, disease and environmental collapse since Malthus's predictions at the end of the 18th century, it asks; and hasn't technology always bailed us out? The answer is complicated.

Technology has indeed averted disaster, but only for those who have access to modern technologies built around first-world science. For a billion or more people in the poorest regions of the world, Malthusian catastrophes are a frequent visitation. Millions every year die prematurely as a result of poverty. Climatic shocks such as this year's drought in southern Africa, delayed monsoons in south Asia and an emerging El Niño cycle put hundreds of millions more at risk.

Moreover, technology does not arrive as manna from heaven. It is the result of significant investment by the public sector as well as the private sector. It was US government-led efforts of the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control, the US Department of Agriculture and the universities that contributed indispensably to US food productivity and a string of breakthroughs in medical technology and public health. But these scientific advances have not reached the impoverished peoples of much of tropical sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia, where disease and agronomic conditions are very different. Nor have scientific advances yet resolved the global bind over energy use and climate change.

Free-market fundamentalists are right to deny erroneous claims that we are about to run out of energy on a global scale. The world consumes about 6bn tons of fossil fuels a year worldwide and still has perhaps 10,000bn tons of coal reserves alone, not to mention other fuels.

The problem, of course, is that reliance on coal dramatically exacerbates the risks of man-made climate change. Technological advances here too could bail us out - for example, if the carbon emissions from coal burning could be captured in magnesium
ores and stored beneath the earth's surface, as Klaus Lackner, professor of
geophysics at Columbia University, has ingeniously suggested. But this too would
require considerable research and development from government as well as private
sources, and current levels of investment have been tiny.

The other great hope for heading off ecological catastrophe is the slowing of rapid
population growth. It took thousands of generations of our species to arrive at the
billionth human being in about 1830, but just 170 years more to add an additional
5bn. The sheer momentum created by the current young age structure of the world's
population will carry the total up another 2bn or so by mid-century, even if, from now
on, every woman were to give birth to just two children. Of course, the world's
population is likely to grow faster than this: hundreds of millions of women in the
developing world are still having more children than the replacement rate.

Here, again, the US right wing undercuts policies that could promote sustainable
development. The attacks on family planning programmes not only threaten 30 years
of US efforts but aim to torpedo the invaluable work of the UN as well, by crippling the

Family planning is not, to be sure, the only policy tool for reducing rapid population
growth in poor countries. Extensive experience and research has shown that poor
women have fewer children when they are literate, have opportunities for market
employment, and have access to health care for their children. High child survival
rates give the parents enough confidence to limit the number of children. In this
sense, increased education opportunities for girls, expanded healthcare coverage of
the world's poor, as well as expanded family planning programmes, should all take
centre stage at Johannesburg.

A successful summit in Johannesburg would therefore undertake a number of
commitments. The governments would commit to take seriously the challenges of
sustainable development - not only for the one-sixth of humanity living with high
income but also for the five-sixths of humanity in the developing world - and
especially the one-sixth of humanity whose lives are a daily struggle for survival.

They would acknowledge the real risks that population growth and economic activity
have generated, ranging from man-made climate change to the depletion of fisheries
to the degradation of fragile ecosystems around the world. They would pledge to pay
careful attention to the emerging scientific knowledge that is increasingly
documenting these risks.

For the poorest of the poor, they would pledge food aid, expanded access to
healthcare and family planning services, clean water and sanitation, and a scientific
effort to address the problems of tropical disease and agriculture.

And for the world as a whole, they would declare a global effort to mobilise science
and technology to ease the harsh trade-off between energy use and climate change.
so that the still bountiful reserves of fossil fuels could be used safely while other clean
technologies are adopted during the century.

All of this the world should do with or without the US at the table, just as it has
decided to move forward with the Kyoto Treaty - limiting carbon emissions - despite
Washington's arrogant disregard. Sooner or later, the Americans too will wake up to
global realities.

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